

1. An Introduction to Sociology
 1. [What Is Sociology?](#)
2. Sociological Research
 1. [Approaches to Sociological Research](#)

What Is Sociology?

- Explain concepts central to sociology
- Understand how different sociological perspectives have developed



Sociologists learn about society as a whole while studying one-to-one and group interactions. (Photo courtesy of Gareth Williams/flickr)

What Are Society and Culture?

Sociology is the study of groups and group interactions, societies and social interactions, from small and personal groups to very large groups. A group of people who live in a defined geographic area, who interact with one another, and who share a common culture is what sociologists call a **society**. Sociologists study all aspects and levels of society. Sociologists working from the **micro-level** study small groups and individual interactions, while those using **macro-level** analysis look at trends among and between large groups and societies. For example, a micro-level study might look at the accepted rules of conversation in various groups such as among teenagers or business professionals. In contrast, a macro-level analysis might research the ways that language use has changed over time or in social media outlets.

The term **culture** refers to the group's shared practices, values, and beliefs. Culture encompasses a group's way of life, from routine, everyday interactions to the most important parts of group members' lives. It includes everything produced by a society, including all of the social rules. Sociologists often study culture using the **sociological imagination**, which pioneer sociologist C. Wright Mills described as an awareness of the relationship between a person's behavior and experience and the wider culture that shaped the person's choices and perceptions. It's a way of seeing our own and other people's behavior in relationship to history and social structure (1959).

One illustration of this is a person's decision to marry. In the United States, this choice is heavily influenced by individual feelings; however, the social acceptability of marriage relative to the person's circumstances also plays a part. Remember, though, that culture is a product of the people in a society; sociologists take care not to treat the concept of "culture" as though it were alive in its own right. **Reification** is an error of treating an abstract concept as though it has a real, material existence (Sahn 2013).

Studying Patterns: How Sociologists View Society

All sociologists are interested in the experiences of individuals and how those experiences are shaped by interactions with social groups and society as a whole. To a sociologist, the personal decisions an individual makes do not exist in a vacuum. Cultural patterns and social forces put pressure on people to select one choice over another. Sociologists try to identify these general patterns by examining the behavior of large groups of people living in the same society and experiencing the same societal pressures.

Changes in the U.S. family structure offer an example of patterns that sociologists are interested in studying. A "typical" family now is vastly different than in past decades when most U.S. families consisted of married parents living in a home with their unmarried children. The percent of unmarried couples, same-sex couples, single-parent and single-adult households is increasing, as well as is the number of expanded households, in which extended family members such as grandparents, cousins, or adult children live together in the family home (U.S. Census Bureau 2013).

While mothers still make up the majority of single parents, millions of fathers are also raising their children alone, and more than 1 million of these single fathers have never been married (Williams Institute 2010; cited in Ludden 2012). Increasingly,

single men and women and cohabitating opposite-sex or same-sex couples are choosing to raise children outside of marriage through surrogates or adoption.

Some sociologists study **social facts**, which are the laws, morals, values, religious beliefs, customs, fashions, rituals, and all of the cultural rules that govern social life, that may contribute to these changes in the family. Do people in the United States view marriage and family differently than before? Do employment and economic conditions play a role? How has culture influenced the choices that individuals make in living arrangements? Other sociologists are studying the consequences of these new patterns, such as the ways children are affected by them or changing needs for education, housing, and healthcare.



Modern U.S. families may be very different in structure from what was historically typical. (Photo courtesy of Tony Alter/Wikimedia Commons)

Another example of the way society influences individual decisions can be seen in people's opinions about and use of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP benefits. Some people believe those who receive SNAP benefits are lazy and unmotivated. Statistics from the United States Department of Agriculture show a complex picture.

| State | Population | Number Receiving SNAP | Percentage of residents receiving SNAP | Average Weekly Earnings |
|----------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------|---|--|
| District of Columbia | 601,723 | 135,796 | 22.6% | \$1,667.00 |
| Florida | 18,801,310 | 3,664,055 | 19.5% | \$852.00 |
| Rhode Island | 1,052,567 | 172,343 | 16.4% | \$919.00 |
| Ohio | 11,536,504 | 1,627,589 | 14.1% | \$878.00 |
| Massachusetts | 6,547,629 | 787,411 | 12.0% | \$1,197.00 |
| New Jersey | 8,791,894 | 887,259 | 10.1% | \$1,116.00 |
| Wyoming | 563,626 | 34,167 | 6.1% | \$866.00 |
| | | | | |
| | | National Average: | 14.5% | \$974.00 |

SNAP Use by State in 2005 Sociologists examine social conditions in different states to explain differences in the number of people receiving SNAP benefits. (Sources:

U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Census Bureau, Food Research and Action Center, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics)

The percentage of the population receiving SNAP benefits is much higher in certain states than in others. Does this mean, if the stereotype above were applied, that people in some states are lazier and less motivated than those in other states? Sociologists study the economies in each state—comparing unemployment rates, food, energy costs, and other factors—to explain differences in social issues like this.

To identify social trends, sociologists also study how people use SNAP benefits and how people react to their use. Research has found that for many people from all classes, there is a strong stigma attached to the use of SNAP benefits. This stigma can prevent people who qualify for this type of assistance from using SNAP benefits. According to Hanson and Gundersen (2002), how strongly this stigma is felt is linked to the general economic climate. This illustrates how sociologists observe a pattern in society.

Sociologists identify and study patterns related to all kinds of contemporary social issues. The “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, the emergence of the Tea Party as a political faction, how Twitter has influenced everyday communication—these are all examples of topics that sociologists might explore.

Studying Part and Whole: How Sociologists View Social Structures

A key basis of the sociological perspective is the concept that the individual and society are inseparable. It is impossible to study one without the other. German sociologist Norbert Elias called the process of simultaneously analyzing the behavior of individuals and the society that shapes that behavior **figuration**.

An application that makes this concept understandable is the practice of religion. While people experience their religions in a distinctly individual manner, religion exists in a larger social context. For instance, an individual’s religious practice may be influenced by what government dictates, holidays, teachers, places of worship, rituals, and so on. These influences underscore the important relationship between individual practices of religion and social pressures that influence that religious experience (Elias 1978).

Note:

Individual-Society Connections

When sociologist Nathan Kierns spoke to his friend Ashley (a pseudonym) about the move she and her partner had made from an urban center to a small Midwestern town, he was curious about how the social pressures placed on a lesbian couple differed from one community to the other. Ashley said that in the city they had been accustomed to getting looks and hearing comments when she and her partner walked hand in hand. Otherwise, she felt that they were at least being tolerated. There had been little to no outright discrimination.

Things changed when they moved to the small town for her partner's job. For the first time, Ashley found herself experiencing direct discrimination because of her sexual orientation. Some of it was particularly hurtful. Landlords would not rent to them. Ashley, who is a highly trained professional, had a great deal of difficulty finding a new job.

When Nathan asked Ashley if she and her partner became discouraged or bitter about this new situation, Ashley said that rather than letting it get to them, they decided to do something about it. Ashley approached groups at a local college and several churches in the area. Together they decided to form the town's first gay-straight alliance.

The alliance has worked successfully to educate their community about same-sex couples. It also worked to raise awareness about the kinds of discrimination that Ashley and her partner experienced in the town and how those could be eliminated. The alliance has become a strong advocacy group, and it is working to attain equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, or LBGT individuals.

Kierns observed that this is an excellent example of how negative social forces can result in a positive response from individuals to bring about social change (Kierns 2011).

Summary

Sociology is the systematic study of society and social interaction. In order to carry out their studies, sociologists identify cultural patterns and social forces and determine how they affect individuals and groups. They also develop ways to apply their findings to the real world.

Section Quiz

Exercise:

Problem: Which of the following best describes sociology as a subject?

- a. The study of individual behavior
- b. The study of cultures
- c. The study of society and social interaction
- d. The study of economics

Solution:
Answers

C

Exercise:

Problem:

C. Wright Mills once said that sociologists need to develop a sociological _____ to study how society affects individuals.

- a. culture
- b. imagination
- c. method
- d. tool

Solution:
Answers

B

Exercise:

Problem:

A sociologist defines society as a group of people who reside in a defined area, share a culture, and who:

- a. interact
- b. work in the same industry
- c. speak different languages
- d. practice a recognized religion

Solution:
Answers

A

Exercise:

Problem: Seeing patterns means that a sociologist needs to be able to:

- a. compare the behavior of individuals from different societies
- b. compare one society to another
- c. identify similarities in how social groups respond to social pressure
- d. compare individuals to groups

Solution:

Answers

C

Short Answer

Exercise:

Problem:

What do you think C. Wright Mills meant when he said that to be a sociologist, one had to develop a sociological imagination?

Exercise:

Problem:

Describe a situation in which a choice you made was influenced by societal pressures.

Further Research

Sociology is a broad discipline. Different kinds of sociologists employ various methods for exploring the relationship between individuals and society. Check out more about sociology at <http://openstaxcollege.org/l/what-is-sociology>.

References

Elias, Norbert. 1978. *What Is Sociology?* New York: Columbia University Press.

Hanson, Kenneth, and Craig Gundersen. 2002. "How Unemployment Affects the Food Stamp Program." *Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report Number 26-7*. USDA. Retrieved January 19, 2012 (<http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/fanrr26/fanrr26-7/fanrr26-7.pdf>).

Ludden, Jennifer. 2012. "Single Dads By Choice: More Men Going It Alone." npr. Retrieved December 30, 2014 (<http://www.npr.org/2012/06/19/154860588/single-dads-by-choice-more-men-going-it-alone>).

Mills, C. Wright. 2000 [1959]. *The Sociological Imagination*. 40th ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

Sahn, Richard. 2013. "The Dangers of Reification." *The Contrary Perspective*. Retrieved October 14, 2014 (<http://contraryperspective.com/2013/06/06/the-dangers-of-reification/>).

U.S. Census Bureau. 2013. "America's Families and Living Arrangements: 2012." Retrieved December 30, 2014 (<http://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/p20-570.pdf>).

Glossary

culture

a group's shared practices, values, and beliefs

figuration

the process of simultaneously analyzing the behavior of an individual and the society that shapes that behavior

reification

an error of treating an abstract concept as though it has a real, material existence

society

a group of people who live in a defined geographical area who interact with one another and who share a common culture

sociological imagination

the ability to understand how your own past relates to that of other people, as well as to history in general and societal structures in particular

sociology

the systematic study of society and social interaction

Approaches to Sociological Research

- Define and describe the scientific method
- Explain how the scientific method is used in sociological research
- Understand the function and importance of an interpretive framework
- Define what reliability and validity mean in a research study

When sociologists apply the sociological perspective and begin to ask questions, no topic is off limits. Every aspect of human behavior is a source of possible investigation. Sociologists question the world that humans have created and live in. They notice patterns of behavior as people move through that world. Using sociological methods and systematic research within the framework of the scientific method and a scholarly interpretive perspective, sociologists have discovered workplace patterns that have transformed industries, family patterns that have enlightened family members, and education patterns that have aided structural changes in classrooms.

The crime during a full moon discussion put forth a few loosely stated opinions. If the human behaviors around those claims were tested systematically, a police officer, for example, could write a report and offer the findings to sociologists and the world in general. The new perspective could help people understand themselves and their neighbors and help people make better decisions about their lives. It might seem strange to use scientific practices to study social trends, but, as we shall see, it's extremely helpful to rely on systematic approaches that research methods provide.

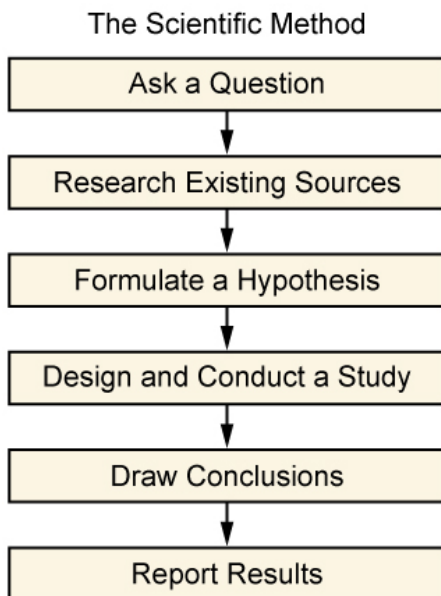
Sociologists often begin the research process by asking a question about how or why things happen in this world. It might be a unique question about a new trend or an old question about a common aspect of life. Once the sociologist forms the question, he or she proceeds through an in-depth process to answer it. In deciding how to design that process, the researcher may adopt a scientific approach or an interpretive framework. The following sections describe these approaches to knowledge.

The Scientific Method

Sociologists make use of tried and true methods of research, such as experiments, surveys, and field research. But humans and their social interactions are so diverse that these interactions can seem impossible to chart or explain. It might seem that science is about discoveries and chemical reactions or about proving ideas right or wrong rather than about exploring the nuances of human behavior.

However, this is exactly why scientific models work for studying human behavior. A scientific process of research establishes parameters that help make sure results are objective and accurate. Scientific methods provide limitations and boundaries that focus a study and organize its results.

The scientific method involves developing and testing theories about the world based on empirical evidence. It is defined by its commitment to systematic observation of the empirical world and strives to be objective, critical, skeptical, and logical. It involves a series of prescribed steps that have been established over centuries of scholarship.



The scientific method
is an essential tool in
research.

But just because sociological studies use scientific methods does not make the results less human. Sociological topics are not reduced to right or wrong facts. In this field, results of studies tend to provide people with access to knowledge they did not have before—knowledge of other cultures, knowledge of rituals and beliefs, or knowledge of trends and attitudes. No matter what research approach they use, researchers want to maximize the study's **reliability**, which refers to how likely research results are to be replicated if the study is reproduced. Reliability increases the likelihood that what happens to one person will happen to all people in a group. Researchers also strive for **validity**, which refers to how well the study measures what it was designed to measure. Returning to the crime rate during a full moon topic, reliability of a study would reflect how well the resulting experience represents the average adult crime rate during a full moon. Validity would ensure that the study's design accurately examined what it was designed to study, so an exploration of adult criminal behaviors during a full moon should address that issue and not veer into other age groups' crimes, for example.

In general, sociologists tackle questions about the role of social characteristics in outcomes. For example, how do different communities fare in terms of psychological well-being, community cohesiveness, range of vocation, wealth, crime rates, and so on? Are communities functioning smoothly? Sociologists look between the cracks to discover obstacles to meeting basic human needs. They might study environmental influences and patterns of behavior that lead to crime, substance abuse, divorce, poverty, unplanned pregnancies, or illness. And, because sociological studies are not all focused on negative behaviors or challenging situations, researchers might study vacation trends, healthy eating habits, neighborhood organizations, higher education patterns, games, parks, and exercise habits.

Sociologists can use the scientific method not only to collect but also to interpret and analyze the data. They deliberately apply scientific logic and objectivity. They are interested in—but not attached to—the results. They work outside of their own political or social agendas. This doesn't mean

researchers do not have their own personalities, complete with preferences and opinions. But sociologists deliberately use the scientific method to maintain as much objectivity, focus, and consistency as possible in a particular study.

With its systematic approach, the scientific method has proven useful in shaping sociological studies. The scientific method provides a systematic, organized series of steps that help ensure objectivity and consistency in exploring a social problem. They provide the means for accuracy, reliability, and validity. In the end, the scientific method provides a shared basis for discussion and analysis (Merton 1963).

Typically, the scientific method starts with these steps—1) ask a question, 2) research existing sources, 3) formulate a hypothesis—described below.

Ask a Question

The first step of the scientific method is to ask a question, describe a problem, and identify the specific area of interest. The topic should be narrow enough to study within a geography and time frame. “Are societies capable of sustained happiness?” would be too vague. The question should also be broad enough to have universal merit. “What do personal hygiene habits reveal about the values of students at XYZ High School?” would be too narrow. That said, happiness and hygiene are worthy topics to study. Sociologists do not rule out any topic, but would strive to frame these questions in better research terms.

That is why sociologists are careful to define their terms. In a hygiene study, for instance, hygiene could be defined as “personal habits to maintain physical appearance (as opposed to health),” and a researcher might ask, “How do differing personal hygiene habits reflect the cultural value placed on appearance?” When forming these basic research questions, sociologists develop an **operational definition**, that is, they define the concept in terms of the physical or concrete steps it takes to objectively measure it. The operational definition identifies an observable condition of the concept. By

operationalizing a variable of the concept, all researchers can collect data in a systematic or replicable manner.

The operational definition must be valid, appropriate, and meaningful. And it must be reliable, meaning that results will be close to uniform when tested on more than one person. For example, “good drivers” might be defined in many ways: those who use their turn signals, those who don’t speed, or those who courteously allow others to merge. But these driving behaviors could be interpreted differently by different researchers and could be difficult to measure. Alternatively, “a driver who has never received a traffic violation” is a specific description that will lead researchers to obtain the same information, so it is an effective operational definition.

Research Existing Sources

The next step researchers undertake is to conduct background research through a **literature review**, which is a review of any existing similar or related studies. A visit to the library and a thorough online search will uncover existing research about the topic of study. This step helps researchers gain a broad understanding of work previously conducted on the topic at hand and enables them to position their own research to build on prior knowledge. Researchers—including student researchers—are responsible for correctly citing existing sources they use in a study or that inform their work. While it is fine to borrow previously published material (as long as it enhances a unique viewpoint), it must be referenced properly and never plagiarized.

To study hygiene and its value in a particular society, a researcher might sort through existing research and unearth studies about child-rearing, vanity, obsessive-compulsive behaviors, and cultural attitudes toward beauty. It’s important to sift through this information and determine what is relevant. Using existing sources educates researchers and helps refine and improve studies’ designs.

Formulate a Hypothesis

A **hypothesis** is an assumption about how two or more variables are related; it makes a conjectural statement about the relationship between those variables. In sociology, the hypothesis will often predict how one form of human behavior influences another. In research, **independent variables** are the *cause* of the change. The **dependent variable** is the *effect*, or thing that is changed.

For example, in a basic study, the researcher would establish one form of human behavior as the independent variable and observe the influence it has on a dependent variable. How does gender (the independent variable) affect rate of income (the dependent variable)? How does one’s religion (the independent variable) affect family size (the dependent variable)? How is social class (the dependent variable) affected by level of education (the independent variable)?

| Hypothesis | Independent Variable | Dependent Variable |
|--|------------------------|--------------------|
| The greater the availability of affordable housing, the lower the homeless rate. | Affordable Housing | Homeless Rate |
| The greater the availability of math tutoring, the higher the math grades. | Math Tutoring | Math Grades |
| The greater the police patrol presence, the safer the neighborhood. | Police Patrol Presence | Safer Neighborhood |

| Hypothesis | Independent Variable | Dependent Variable |
|---|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| The greater the factory lighting, the higher the productivity. | Factory Lighting | Productivity |
| The greater the amount of observation, the higher the public awareness. | Observation | Public Awareness |

Examples of Dependent and Independent Variables Typically, the independent variable causes the dependent variable to change in some way.

At this point, a researcher's operational definitions help measure the variables. In a study asking how tutoring improves grades, for instance, one researcher might define a "good" grade as a C or better, while another uses a B+ as a starting point for "good." Another operational definition might describe "tutoring" as "one-on-one assistance by an expert in the field, hired by an educational institution." Those definitions set limits and establish cut-off points that ensure consistency and replicability in a study.

As the table shows, an independent variable is the one that causes a dependent variable to change. For example, a researcher might hypothesize that teaching children proper hygiene (the independent variable) will boost their sense of self-esteem (the dependent variable). Or rephrased, a child's sense of self-esteem depends, in part, on the quality and availability of hygienic resources.

Of course, this hypothesis can also work the other way around. Perhaps a sociologist believes that increasing a child's sense of self-esteem (the independent variable) will automatically increase or improve habits of hygiene (now the dependent variable). Identifying the independent and dependent variables is very important. As the hygiene example shows, simply identifying two topics, or variables, is not enough; their prospective relationship must be part of the hypothesis.

Just because a sociologist forms an educated prediction of a study's outcome doesn't mean data contradicting the hypothesis aren't welcome. Sociologists analyze general patterns in response to a study, but they are equally interested in exceptions to patterns. In a study of education, a researcher might predict that high school dropouts have a hard time finding rewarding careers. While it has become at least a cultural assumption that the higher the education, the higher the salary and degree of career happiness, there are certainly exceptions. People with little education have had stunning careers, and people with advanced degrees have had trouble finding work. A sociologist prepares a hypothesis knowing that results will vary.

Once the preliminary work is done, it's time for the next research steps: designing and conducting a study and drawing conclusions. These research methods are discussed below.

Interpretive Framework

While many sociologists rely on the scientific method as a research approach, others operate from an **interpretive framework**. While systematic, this approach doesn't follow the hypothesis-testing model that seeks to find generalizable results. Instead, an *interpretive framework*, sometimes referred to as an interpretive perspective, seeks to understand social worlds from the point of view of participants, which leads to in-depth knowledge.

Interpretive research is generally more descriptive or narrative in its findings. Rather than formulating a hypothesis and method for testing it, an interpretive researcher will develop approaches to explore the topic at hand that may involve a significant amount of direct observation or interaction with subjects. This type of researcher also learns as he or she proceeds and sometimes adjusts the research methods or processes midway to optimize findings as they evolve.

Summary

Using the scientific method, a researcher conducts a study in five phases: asking a question, researching existing sources, formulating a hypothesis, conducting a study, and drawing conclusions. The scientific method is useful in that it provides a clear method of organizing a study. Some sociologists conduct research through an interpretive framework rather than employing the scientific method.

Scientific sociological studies often observe relationships between variables. Researchers study how one variable changes another. Prior to conducting a study, researchers are careful to apply operational definitions to their terms and to establish dependent and independent variables.

Section Quiz

Exercise:

Problem:

A measurement is considered _____ if it actually measures what it is intended to measure, according to the topic of the study.

- a. reliable
- b. sociological
- c. valid
- d. quantitative

Solution:

Answer

C

Exercise:

Problem:

Sociological studies test relationships in which change in one _____ causes change in another.

- a. test subject
 - b. behavior
 - c. variable
 - d. operational definition
-

Solution:
Answers

C

Exercise:

Problem:

In a study, a group of ten-year-old boys are fed doughnuts every morning for a week and then weighed to see how much weight they gained. Which factor is the dependent variable?

- a. The doughnuts
 - b. The boys
 - c. The duration of a week
 - d. The weight gained
-

Solution:
Answers

D

Exercise:

Problem:

Which statement provides the best operational definition of “childhood obesity”?

- a. Children who eat unhealthy foods and spend too much time watching television and playing video games

- b. A distressing trend that can lead to health issues including type 2 diabetes and heart disease
 - c. Body weight at least 20 percent higher than a healthy weight for a child of that height
 - d. The tendency of children today to weigh more than children of earlier generations
-

Solution:

Answers

C

Short Answer

Exercise:

Problem:

Write down the first three steps of the scientific method. Think of a broad topic that you are interested in and which would make a good sociological study—for example, ethnic diversity in a college, homecoming rituals, athletic scholarships, or teen driving. Now, take that topic through the first steps of the process. For each step, write a few sentences or a paragraph: 1) Ask a question about the topic. 2) Do some research and write down the titles of some articles or books you'd want to read about the topic. 3) Formulate a hypothesis.

Further Research

For a historical perspective on the scientific method in sociology, read “The Elements of Scientific Method in Sociology” by F. Stuart Chapin (1914) in the *American Journal of Sociology*: <http://openstaxcollege.org/l/Method-in-Sociology>.

References

Arkowitz, Hal, and Scott O. Lilienfeld. 2009. "Lunacy and the Full Moon: Does a full moon really trigger strange behavior?" *Scientific American*. Retrieved October 20, 2014

(<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/lunacy-and-the-full-moon>).

Berger, Peter L. 1963. *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*. New York: Anchor Books.

Merton, Robert. 1968 [1949]. *Social Theory and Social Structure*. New York: Free Press.

“Scientific Method Lab,” the University of Utah, http://aspire.cosmic-ray.org/labs/scientific_method/sci_method_main.html.

Glossary

dependent variables

a variable changed by other variables

hypothesis

a testable educated guess about predicted outcomes between two or more variables

independent variables

variables that cause changes in dependent variables

interpretive framework

a sociological research approach that seeks in-depth understanding of a topic or subject through observation or interaction; this approach is not based on hypothesis testing

literature review

a scholarly research step that entails identifying and studying all existing studies on a topic to create a basis for new research

operational definitions

specific explanations of abstract concepts that a researcher plans to study

reliability

a measure of a study's consistency that considers how likely results are to be replicated if a study is reproduced

scientific method

an established scholarly research method that involves asking a question, researching existing sources, forming a hypothesis, designing and conducting a study, and drawing conclusions

validity

the degree to which a sociological measure accurately reflects the topic of study